



Ecoprecarity and Necropolitical Sovereignty in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract— *The escalating environmental crisis is frequently framed through a universalized lens of “global threat,” a discourse that obscures the uneven distribution of ecological vulnerability. This article examines Amitav Ghosh’s The Hungry Tide (2004) as a sophisticated counter-archive that challenges abstract narratives by documenting the intersection of ecological degradation and structural abandonment in the Bengal Sundarbans. Using concepts such as Achille Mbembe’s ‘Necropolitics’, Rob Nixon’s ‘Slow Violence’, and Judith Butler’s notion of ‘Grievability’, the study argues that the Sundarbans acts as a “State of Exception” where the postcolonial state decides whose lives are allowed to be lived and whose are allowed to wither. The concept of Ecoprecarity is central to this analysis. It captures the entanglement of damaged environments with the corporeal vulnerability of the subaltern body. This article analyses how conservation and development have been weaponised as necropolitical tools, as well as the historical Morichjhapi massacre and the struggles of characters like Fokir. The state naturalizes systemic neglect by privileging endangered species over marginalised settlers. The state also frames death as inevitable “acts of God” rather than outcomes of political choice. Ultimately, Ghosh’s novel resists the erasure of ungrievable lives, offering a visceral critique of an environmentalism detached from social justice.*



Keywords— *Ecoprecarity, Ecological Vulnerability, Environmental Justice, Grievability, Necropolitics, Slow Violence, Subaltern Studies*

Introduction

In the contemporary imagination, the environmental crisis is frequently portrayed as a spectacular, dramatic, sudden-onset catastrophe- a singular event of “hypervisibility” that calls for urgent, though temporary, worldwide focus. However, this preoccupation with the ‘spectacle’ of disaster flattens the intricate socio-political landscapes where environmental harm truly occurs. In the Indian context, environmental degradation seldom serves as a “great equalizer”; instead, it acts as a magnifying glass for the existing structural inequalities. Amitav Ghosh’s 2004 novel *The Hungry Tide* acts as a significant contribution to this discourse, moving beyond the simplistic clichés of climate fiction to map what can be termed a “topography of abandonment.” By placing the shifting silt of the Sundarbans at the heart of a postcolonial conflict, Ghosh reveals that the tide country is not merely a site of natural

volatility, but an experimental ground for handling “disposable” human life.

To understand the systematic nature of this neglect and abandonment, this article places Ghosh’s narrative at the theoretical intersection of Achille Mbembe’s “Necropolitics” and Rob Nixon’s “Slow Violence.” While Michel Foucault’s biopolitics focuses on the “power to foster life,” Mbembe’s necropolitics theorizes the “The ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (Mbembe 11). In the Sundarbans, this power is not consistently enforced with violence- although Morichjhapi massacre remains as a grim historical exception- but through the intentional construction of “death-worlds”. These are social and geographical spaces where individuals endure life conditions that give them the “status of the ‘living dead’.” This governance of

necropolitics is made possible through what Rob Nixon terms "Slow Violence": a type of violence that is "...incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales" (Nixon 2). In contrast to the sudden brutality of war, the slow violence of the tide country- the deteriorating embankments, the lack of medical infrastructure, and saltwater encroachment on farmland- occurs out of sight and off the ledger of "official" history. The convergence of these two frameworks, we can observe how the state utilizes the temporal invisibility of slow violence to enact a necropolitical strategy and agenda, effectively delegating the "elimination" of marginalized communities to the unpredictable forces of the environment.

Central to this study is the concept of Ecoprecarity. While "precarity" usually signifies a condition or state of political and economic instability and uncertainty, ecoprecarity describes the specific situation where bodily and physical survival is closely tied to a collapsing or hostile ecosystem. It signifies the "biological tax" (India, Supreme Ct.) paid by the subaltern for existing in an environment and landscape that the state has systemically neglected and abandoned. In *The Hungry Tide*, ecoprecarity is a corporeal reality not an abstract concept; it is inscribed on the skin of the fishermen, felt in the hunger of the settlers, and marked by the persistent, normalized danger of the tiger. Ecoprecarity highlights the connection between environmental harm and physical vulnerability, emphasizing how illness, exhaustion, and displacement are not "accidents" of nature, but outcomes of a socio-ecological hierarchy.

This article argues that *The Hungry Tide* rather than being a mere work of "cli-fi" it constitutes a rigorous critique of the "Environmentalism of the Rich." Using a multifaceted narrative of scientific inquiry, historical recovery and subaltern survival, Ghosh illustrates how the postcolonial government dictates who is "allowed to wither" in the changing silt of the Sundarbans. The novel acts as a counter-archive by exposing the state's role in naturalizing the deaths of the marginalized people as "acts of God," thereby reinstating the political dimension of ecological suffering. This study ultimately argues that the environmental crisis in the Sundarbans reflects structural violence, where the distribution of "grievability" is governed by the ruthless logic of necropolitical sovereignty.

The Necro-Geography of the Tide Country: Maps, Silt, and Sovereignty

The Sundarbans, as depicted in *The Hungry Tide*, serves not just as a setting or backdrop for human conflict and drama; it is a necro-geography, a space where the land's physical traits are utilized by sovereign authority to control and manage the surplus population. This section examines how

the state employs the "intractability" of the archipelago to justify the suspension of civic protections, effectively transforming the tide country into a "State of Exception". The conflict between various perspectives on "seeing" the is central to the novel's critique of necropolitics. Piya, the cetologist, arrives in the Sundarbans with advanced high-tech GPS monitors and scientific charts. Her maps symbolize the "State's Eyes," a vision that emphasizes data, conservation figures and metrics, and the protection of species. However, as the story unfolds, it becomes evident that these "official" map, serve as instruments of erasure. By designating large areas of the archipelago as "forest reserves" or "protected zones," the state renders the long-standing human communities or settlements within them illegal. This cartographic or map-based violence transforms indigenous and refugee populations onto "encroachers." In the framework of necropolitics, if a community is absent from the official map, their subsequent "disappearance"—whether through forced eviction or environmental catastrophe—does not register as a loss. The map, therefore, becomes a tool of pre-emptive ungrievability.

A key and significant expression of necropolitics in the novel is the strategically calculated denial of infrastructure. The "badh" (embankments) acts as the thin and fragile, porous line between the *Bios* (political life) of the town and the *Zoe* (bare life) of the tidal region. The continuous neglect by the state to uphold these embankments is not mere negligence; it constitutes a type of structural violence. The fragility of the mud walls serve as a material metaphor for the precariousness of the subaltern's right to life and their existence. By allowing the settlers to face the wrath of the "hungry" tide, the state "outsources" its violence to the environment and surroundings. Similarly, Nilima's struggle to sustain and maintain the hospital at Lusibari underscores the absence and lack of the state's "care-giving" system. The hospital stands and serves as a weak bulwark against death in an area where the state and government has decided that life is not worth the investment of permanent brick and mortar.

By keeping and maintaining the Sundarbans in a continuous state of underdevelopment, the government guarantees that any environmental event—a cyclone or a tidal surge—will result in mass mortality. This allows the sovereign to frame these deaths as "acts of God." This naturalization and normalization of death is the ultimate necropolitical achievement: it frees the state from accountability. When the environment is presented as the primary killer, the political choices that contributed to the vulnerability of the victims—the lack of storm shelters, the lack of early warning systems for the poor, and the weak embankments—are successfully obscured. In this necro-geography, the "hunger" of the tide represents not just a

biological or ecological power, but also a political one. The tide consumes what the state has already marked as disposable. As the next section will argue, this logic reached its most violent zenith in the historical memory of Morichjhapi, where the “environment” was explicitly used as a weapon of the state.

Conservation as Execution: The Morichjhapi Massacre as a Necropolitical Archive

While the “slow violence” of eroding banks defines the daily life of the tide country, the historical core of *The Hungry Tide*—the Morichjhapi massacre of 1979—embodies a “punctual” and clear expression of necropolitical sovereignty and authority. In this section, the analysis focuses on how the state’s drive for “green” conservation was weaponized to justify the liquidation of a marginalized Dalit refugee population. The Morichjhapi incident, recovered through the “counter-archive” of Nirmal’s journal, reveals a chilling hierarchy of life. The postcolonial state, eager to project an image of ecological responsibility to the global community through “Project Tiger,” designated the island of Morichjhapi as a protected forest reserve. When thousands of Dalit refugees escaping caste-related persecution from Bangladesh arrived on the island to create a self-sustaining community, they were framed not as citizens in need of protection, but as ecological pollutants. The necropolitical decision was stark and clear: the life of the *Panthera tigris* was granted international “grievability” and legal protection, while the lives of the refugees were deemed “ungrievable.” As Nirmal notes in his journal: “The government had decided that the refugees had to go . . . the tigers had to be protected . . . It was a struggle between those who had everything and those who had nothing” (Ghosh 216).

The state’s approach to evict the settlers was a masterclass in the intersection of slow and spectacular violence. Through the implementation of an economic blockade, cutting off food and water supplies, and destroying the settlers’ basic infrastructure, the state utilized ecoprecarity as a weapon. The refugees found themselves in a condition of “bare life,” where their biological survival and existence were systematically undermined. When the state eventually intervened with physical force—burning huts and firing upon unarmed settlers—it signified the last step in a journey that had previously “killed” them socially and legally. This incident epitomizes the “Environmentalism of the Rich”: a mode of conservation that views the subaltern as an obstacle to a “pristine” nature. The state did not merely safeguard the environment; it used the discourse of the environment to sanitize a massacre.

In this context, literature serves as a counter-archive to developmental narratives, and in the novel, Nirmal’s

notebook represents this counter-archive in a literal sense. The “official” history of West Bengal has mostly overlooked the Morichjhapi massacre, treating it as a minor “police action.” Focusing on Nirmal’s eyewitness account, Ghosh performs a “Necro-archiving”—a retrieval of the names, the poems, and the revolutionary hopes of those the state intended to silence. The journal forces the reader to acknowledge that the “pristine” Sundarbans enjoyed by tourists and scientists like Piya is built upon a foundation of subaltern bones. It exposes the “structural abandonment” of the marginalized, proving that the environmental crisis is inseparable from the history of state-sponsored displacement and the selective distribution of the right to exist.

Ecoprecarity and the “Bare Life” of the Subaltern Body

If Morichjhapi embodies the state’s necropolitics at a structural scale, the character of Fokir symbolizes the lived experience of ecoprecarity on an individual, corporeal level. This section examines how the subaltern body becomes the primary site where ecological and political violence intersect, moving beyond abstract theory into the physical reality of flesh and bone. Throughout the novel, Fokir exhibits a profound silence and deep ‘ecological literacy’; yet, this intimacy with the environment is never romanticized; rather, it is presented as a condition of extreme vulnerability. Fokir’s life is a localized cycle of exhaustion and exposure, embodying the hallmarks of ecoprecarity where his body serves as a literal buffer between the “civilized” world of urban visitors and the “hungry” tide. This corporeal vulnerability reaches its allegorical peak during the storm at the novel’s climax, which serves as the ultimate necropolitical test. In the hollow of a tree, Fokir uses his own body as a physical shield to protect Piya from the wind and debris. In this moment, the hierarchy of life is rendered physical: the *Bios*—embodied by Piya as a protected citizen with global influence and agency and a passport—survives only because the *Zoe*, or the unprotected “bare life” of Fokir, absorbs the mechanical violence of the environment.

Fokir’s death is not viewed as a tragedy by the government or the scientific community at large; rather, it is sanitized as a “casualty of the storm”. Because Fokir exists outside the formal structures of the state—lacking a “**juridical presence**”, documented property, or political standing—his death is rendered fundamentally ungrievable. Although Piya personalizes her grief for him, the broader “developmental narrative” of the region remains undisturbed by his absence. His death perfectly illustrates the “differential exposure to harm” (4) inherent in the Sundarbans: the scientist and researchers eventually return to her world to translate her experiences into a scientific

report, while the subaltern remains in the silt, reduced to a biological footnote of a natural event. In the end, Fokir's death represents the inevitable outcome of a life spent in ecoprecarity—a life destined for neglect by a system that sees no worth in the existence of the marginalized.

Negotiating Survival: Myth, Agency, and the Environmentalism of the Poor

Although the state exerts necropolitical influence via systematic neglect, the marginalized residents of the Sundarbans do not remain passive victims in the face of erasure. This section explores the way in which the subaltern community utilizes traditional knowledge and communal myths as a robust form of “social infrastructure” to counter state-sanctioned precarity, highlighting “contested survival” as an active, lived condition. Without state protection, the settlers turn to the myth of Bon Bibi, the guardian spirit of the forests, which serves as a profound “counter-archive” of local ecological ethics. Unlike the state's exclusionary conservation laws, the legend of Bon Bibi establishes a “moral ecology” that serves as a social contract for the poor. It provides a stringent code of conduct that allows humans to survive in a hostile landscape by respecting the “limits of the forest,” effectively governing human-environment interactions where formal law fails or oppresses. Furthermore, this myth acts as a syncretic archive, bridging Hindu and Muslim identities to create a unified subaltern front against both the metaphorical “hunger” of the tide and the literal “violence” of the state. This indigenous biopolitics represents a communal way to “foster life” even when sovereign power has marked the population for death.

Complementing this spiritual infrastructure is the institutional resistance found in Nilima Bose and the Badabon Trust, which represent a pragmatic, secular response to structural abandonment. While Nirmal's revolutionary focus was fixed on the spectacular and tragic failure of the state at Morichjhapi, Nilima's work emphasizes “resistance through persistence,” focusing on the “slow” work of building clinics and cooperatives. The Trust functions as a material alternative to necropolitical neglect; by providing micro-loans and healthcare, it attempts to pull the subaltern body out of the realm of “bare life” and reintegrate it into a sphere of “political life” and agency. This institutionalization of resilient biopolitics also highlights a critical gendered dimension of survival. The “widow villages” of the Sundarbans demonstrate a specific form of ecofeminist precarity, where women are left to navigate the intersection of ecological risk and social marginalization. Through the Trust, women like Moyna seek to transform their “ungrievable” status into one of economic and social agency, illustrating that survival in the

tide country is not a static state of victimhood, but a constantly negotiated and contested process of reclamation against the forces of abandonment.

CONCLUSION

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* does not offer a romanticized solution to the environmental crisis; instead, it provides a visceral documentation of the systemic cost of exclusion. By applying the lenses of necropolitics and ecoprecarity, this article has demonstrated that the Sundarbans is a space where the environmental and the political are indistinguishable, functioning as a site where nature is weaponized to manage marginalized populations. The novel reveals that the “crisis” is not merely the impending cyclone or rising sea levels, but the pre-existing condition of structural abandonment that renders the subaltern body vulnerable to these events long before they occur. The Morichjhapi massacre serves as the historical proof that the state's “green” narratives and conservation efforts are often built upon necropolitical foundations that prioritize territory and species over human life. Fokir's death, meanwhile, serves as a contemporary reminder that the distribution of “grievability” remains deeply uneven in the postcolonial state, where some deaths are sanitized as natural accidents while others are mourned as national tragedies.

Ultimately, this study contends that contemporary Indian literature—and Ghosh's work in particular—functions as a vital counter-archive. It records the “differential exposure to harm” (4) that developmental and state-centric narratives seek to from erase official history. By forcing the reader to witness the “ungrievable” life of the subaltern, *The Hungry Tide* demands a new more inclusive form of environmentalism: one that does not separate the preservation of the “pristine” forest from the fundamental right of the “precarious” human to exist. Ultimately, these texts reveal environmental crisis not as a future threat, but as a lived condition of structural abandonment. They urge a necessary shift in academic and political focus from the “Spectacle of Disaster” to the “Slow Violence of the Everyday,” ensuring that the voices and histories of those marked for erasure are finally brought to the center of the environmental discourse.

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